

# Environmental activist gets a voice in plan for the future

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If climate patterns maintain or worsen their track, how can Chicago neighborhoods prepare?

It's one of the big questions the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is tackling as it begins to develop its regional plan for 2050.

The agency is [hosting a series of panels](#) and seeking community input through public kiosks and web surveys to spur public discussion on five macro-trends and how Chicago can prepare for them. Kim Wasserman, executive director of the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, will be a panelist on CMAP's forum on climate change Thursday. She shared how her organization is considering climate impacts.

## **Q: How does climate change fit into your priorities?**

A: When we think about climate change, we first and foremost think about the direct impact on low-income communities and communities of color. From flooding to storms to droughts, a lot of times we find that low-income communities of color — and low-income communities in general — feel those catastrophic events before anybody does.

It's very different when flooding happens in Little Village than in Highland Park, or even comparing downtown to other communities. Low-income communities of color, being first to feel the impacts, should be the first invested to prepare and mitigate climate change.

## **Q: What factors do you consider in setting priorities on climate issues?**

A: This is the first time ever where we're not just advocates and we're initially part of the conversation on the 2050 plan. When we take a step back, we ask ourselves how we're going to go from being reactive to proactive.

For example, with the Lucas Museum to the DePaul stadium to managing the petcoke piles on the South Side to the Unilever diesel facility, there are tiny decisions being made in our community without our community. While many folks don't view them as environmental issues, they have a direct effect not just on our environment, but our economy, our communities and our schools.

## **Q: What climate issues concern you for 2050 based on what we know today?**

A: How our Great Lakes system is being impacted. And with the Trump rollbacks in the environmental executive order, how we're protecting this amazing asset that's providing drinking water and being tapped for people in other states as those states are producing less water.

Look at Flint, Mich., and how we don't have the proper infrastructure now to provide people with livable drinking water. As the system has more strains because our environmental protections are fewer, we don't have capital protections now, and it's only going to get worse.

## **Q: How can neighborhood organizations ensure their needs are addressed?**

A: There has to be true inclusion of the community in the current process and not from a hand-picked community. Not who the aldermen like or the mayor likes, but the whole community. By hosting a couple of meetings and inviting 300 people to sit in a room, people think that is true community. That is not.

All of them should be tapped to have a seat at the table and to help figure out what issues they have and the best ways to fix them. Right now, we get very prescriptive fixes shoved down our throats instead of true community participation.

**Q: Can you give an example?**

A: In the Little Village neighborhood, we're surrounded by viaducts or train tracks. When we flood, you can't get out of the neighborhood. If we know that there could potentially be a catastrophic flood where medical assistance can't get in, why are we not inviting or training our people to work on that if we know that more rainwater from climate change is going to exacerbate the problems?

That would require that the department of planning and city institutions to look at us as whole instead of the four walls of our property.

*Q-and-As are edited for clarity and length.*

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